

Gratitude: 1. We Were Made for Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

November 1, 2020

Passtor Steve Richards

Imagine this: Your life is going rather well. Your job and career have progressed nicely. Your marriage is a good one. Your children are healthy. You've worked hard to live a respectable life. But then one morning, you discover on your arm, a skin blemish unlike any you have had before. Naturally, you assume it will go away in a couple of days, but it does not. In fact, the spot expands and there is a loss of sensation in the skin around it. Although you know it is one of the signs of leprosy, you deny it and cover what is becoming undeniable. Finally, you cannot hide it any longer. As you know, the punishment is severe for those who attempt to conceal leprosy. For that reason and for fear that your family will also be infected, you reveal to your family that you are a leper.

Forced to move out of the house, you leave your family and abandon your job. You join the other lepers, that motley band of suffering that up until now you tried to avoid seeing and thinking about. The lepers survive through begging and scrounging leftover food dumped beyond the edge of town. Now, you are one of them.

The Priests of the Temple declare you "unclean." You are required to carry a leper's bell that you must ring to warn any non-leper who come near. What did you do to deserve this? Nothing. You are sure of it, but everyone else believes, just as you once did, that leprosy is something done to you by God for a reason.

So here you are, a leper. You continue to exist. Leprosy is rarely fatal. But you have lost everything. Cut off from family, robbed of your dignity, and forced to associate with some despicable people – even Samaritans.

But then one day you and nine others encounter a Galilean teacher whom some claim can heal leprosy. The only thing he says to you is go show yourselves to the priest. The priests are the only ones who can legally verify that leprosy is cured. Half way there, unbelievably you discover that the lesions have disappeared. You are HEALED! The cruel injustice has been removed!

All ten of you are incredibly relieved. You cheer. You embrace. One of the group, the Samaritan, is so overjoyed that he says he is going back to find the Galilean healer. But you're not ready for that. You're still too angry and upset. What about the wasted years and months of life? Who will restore the lost time with your family? What about your job and reputation? Who is going to fix all that and make it all the way it is supposed to be? No, all that happened today is a small part of what was rightfully yours has been restored. Let the Samaritan give thanks. He probably deserved his leprosy. He should be lucky he was even with the rest of you. You deserved better. You have the right to much better. And so nine do not return to Jesus.

While all ten were set free of leprosy, let me suggest that only one was well. And if you were one of the ten, would you be one of the nine or the one who took time to go back and give thanks. In my own life, it's not that I'm not grateful, it's just that there is so much that is not right. Early one morning about a week ago, I walked our dog through the neighborhood. It was one of those recent cold mornings after it had snowed. The wind was blowing, and I wished I was wearing an extra layer of clothing. I was thinking about how this was not the kind of day that I wanted. It was winter already even though it was October. I thought of all the things I hoped to accomplish before winter that now wouldn't get done. And I thought about how much I missed

being around people and I thought about the challenges being faced by many of you. And by the time Winston and I got back to the house it felt like the whole world was closing in around me. But what if instead of focusing on all that was wrong, I had stopped to give thanks.

The point of the story that we find in Luke's gospel is found in the 19th verse: **Then Jesus said, "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."** The man has already been healed from his skin disease, so what's Jesus saying? The Greek word for healed is SODZO which means "to be saved, delivered, made whole." The leprosy was gone but he had yet to be healed. And Jesus is saying: "You came and gave thanks and your gratitude has made you whole." We are looking for wholeness – something that will save us from the pain and brokenness of our lives, and Jesus is saying gratitude does that. You were made to give thanks.

Last week, I listened to a TED talk on gratitude by Brother David Stendl-Rost who said: **It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.** Something about expressing gratitude changes our heart. A study was conducted by the University of California, San Diego, of 186 stage B heart patients. One group was asked to keep a gratitude journal, writing down three things they were grateful for every day for eight weeks. The other group was not asked to do anything. At the end of eight weeks, those with the gratitude journal were less depressed, slept better, had improved markers in their blood. Dr. Paul Mills, the author of the study, concluded: "A more grateful heart is a more healthy heart and gratitude journaling is an easy way to support cardiac health." Jesus said, it is the way you are made whole. I wonder, could we do that? Give thanks each day.

My hope is that at the end of this series, we are all filled with more gratitude. I want to invite you to join me in a 28 day challenge. Each day, write down one thing that you are grateful for. Make it a short letter to God. "Dear Lord, I am thankful for..." You can find a Gratitude Journal on our website. You can print a copy or download it to your computer or tablet and use that as your journal.

A few years ago, during Amanda's cancer treatments, we attended a seminar where we heard Dr. Amit Sood talk about his research into gratitude. Who knew the Mayo Clinic was researching gratitude? And he suggested a practice that I decided to implement in my life. I've told you about this. Most of us wake up in the morning and begin thinking about all the things we need to do. But instead, Dr. Sood, suggests we start the day with gratitude. Think of five people in your life to whom you are grateful. Picture their faces, and send them a silent thank you. Or you could decorate your bedroom wall with their pictures so they are the first images you see each morning. Or take a post-it note and write the word GRATEFUL and put it on your bathroom mirror. The point is really what Jesus was teaching two thousand years ago. Do you want to be whole?

Gratitude matters. It affects us. Some of us have been at home a lot more than we expected, spending time with each other – and that's good to a point, but I'm guessing some of you are feeling it's too much of a good thing. How are you doing with expressing gratitude? There are moments when we get under each other's skin. What if we looked for ways to express gratitude? If you would rate yourself on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being grateful all the time and 1 being you don't remember the last time you expressed gratitude. How would you rate yourself? This is a self-assessment. You don't need to tell anyone. But over the next 28 days, let's try to increase our score at least one number.

In 1997, Fred Rogers was given a lifetime achievement award by the Academy of Motion Pictures. His acceptance speech was one of the most gracious thanks that I remember hearing.

[video] You and I didn't get to where we are by ourselves. We were made to give thanks. Life is a gift. This day is a gift. You didn't do anything to create this day or deserve it, and it wasn't guaranteed. We live and breathe and it's all a gift. What we do with this day is our gift back to God.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 1, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Good and gracious God, your steadfast love endures forever, as well as your faithfulness to all generations. Continue to bring healing to the ill, comfort to the grieving, direction to the lost, serenity to the anxious and justice to the oppressed. Make us into instruments of your peace, so that we may carry your love into places of despair and doubt. Inspire us always to be your grateful people, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, November 2

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18

Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Observation: Many scholars believe this was the first of Paul's letters to be written, just two decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. This letter provides insight into Paul's words to those who were among the first to embrace the Christian faith. He exhorts the Thessalonians to remain faithful to Christ and to the Christian community under trying circumstances.

Application: How much do the positive qualities of life Paul listed in this passage (rejoicing, praying, being thankful) appeal to you? How can you nurture an inner appetite for the good? In what ways do you find that choosing to nurture anger or complaint (about yourself, others or life/God) reduces your appetite for the good things God offers?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I'm grateful you didn't call me to give thanks FOR every situation. Even giving thanks IN every situation is often a challenge. Keep growing that capacity in me. Amen.

Tuesday, November 3

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, show us mercy!" When Jesus saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." As they left, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus replied, "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?" Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Observation: In Jesus' day, *leper* meant a person with one of a variety of visible skin diseases. People thought all lepers were highly contagious, so they feared and shunned them. Jesus healed a group of ten such men, who were rejected and outcast due to their visible skin diseases. We see how isolated these sufferers were. They raised their voices and called to Jesus while "keeping their distance from him." But of the ten, only one Samaritan came back to say "thank you."

Application: When one healed man returned to give thanks, Jesus asked, “Where are the other nine?” The text didn’t tell us. Use your imagination and your knowledge of human nature: where do you think they might have been? If you had been one of the ten, which do you think is more likely: that you’d have returned to express your gratitude, or gone about your business?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you even cared about people everyone else avoided. Which means that no matter what my problems, you care about me, too. And for that I thank you deeply. Amen.

Wednesday, November 4

Scripture: Mark 8:1-8; Luke 22:14-19; John 11:35-42

In those days there was another large crowd with nothing to eat. Jesus called his disciples and told them, “I feel sorry for the crowd because they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they won’t have enough strength to travel, for some have come a long distance.” His disciples responded, “How can anyone get enough food in this wilderness to satisfy these people?” Jesus asked, “How much bread do you have?” They said, “Seven loaves.” He told the crowd to sit on the ground. He took the seven loaves, gave thanks, broke them apart, and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they gave the bread to the crowd. They also had a few fish. He said a blessing over them, then gave them to the disciples to hand out also. They ate until they were full. They collected seven baskets full of leftovers.

When the time came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles joined him. He said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I tell you, I won’t eat it until it is fulfilled in God’s kingdom.” After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, “Take this and share it among yourselves. I tell you that from now on I won’t drink from the fruit of the vine until God’s kingdom has come.” After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” But some of them said, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?” Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.” Jesus replied, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me.”

Observation: The creator of the world, the ruler of the universe, chose to “become flesh” and live on earth as a human being (John 1:14). Would you expect such a being to have the ultimate attitude of entitlement, to demand everything that was his by right? We know Jesus didn’t do that. As he gave us a model of what it means to be fully human, the gospels showed that his healthy human life included giving thanks in many different settings.

Application: Do you think Jesus’ reasons for praying were different from your reasons for prayer? Why do you believe Jesus prayed at all, and didn’t just say, “I’m the son of God—I can handle this on my own”? If you had been one of the first disciples, what difference, if any, do you imagine you would have noticed in Jesus after he had been praying?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, at one point, praying, you said, “Thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me.” Help me share that confidence, and say “thank you” for it more often in my own prayers. Amen.

Thursday, November 5

Scripture: Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

When a great crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from one city after another, he spoke to them in a parable: “A farmer went out to scatter his seed. As he was scattering it, some fell on the path where it was crushed, and the birds in the sky came and ate it. Other seed fell on rock. As it grew, it dried up because it had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorns grew with the plants and choked them. Still other seed landed on good soil. When it grew, it produced one hundred times more grain than was scattered.” As he said this, he called out, “Everyone who has ears should pay attention.”

“The parable means this: The seed is God’s word. The seed on the path are those who hear, but then the devil comes and steals the word from their hearts so that they won’t believe and be saved. The seed on the rock are those who receive the word joyfully when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while but fall away when they are tempted. As for the seed that fell among thorny plants, these are the ones who, as they go about their lives, are choked by the concerns, riches, and pleasures of life, and their fruit never matures. The seed that fell on good soil are those who hear the word and commit themselves to it with a good and upright heart. Through their resolve, they bear fruit.

Observation: The image of growing seeds Jesus used to illustrate spiritual growth made sense, not only to people in the farming area around the Sea of Galilee where he told this story, but to any of us who’ve ever tried to garden or grow a lawn. Even good seed, Jesus said, can’t grow strong in poor or untended soil. Living as God’s wishes us to means cultivating an open, “good soil” heart. When we do that, “concerns, riches, and pleasures of life” won’t be able to crowd out the good fruit God is at work to bear in us.

Application: What wishes and concerns most often compete with God’s kingdom to be the top priority in your life? What key choices have made your heart more open to God’s work in cultivating a “good soil” spirit? What shifts in attitudes, actions and values would move you further in the direction of being “good soil” for God’s Word to grow in?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I’m grateful that some days it’s easy to sense your power guiding and growing me. On other days a dozen urgent things seem to try to choke you out of my life. Help me learn how to “weed” those days, to keep my faith life growing strong. Amen.

Friday, November 6

Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-10

Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. We didn’t bring anything into the world and so we can’t take anything out of it: we’ll be happy with food and clothing. But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

Observation: Too often, the news (especially now) is full of words like “worry,” “uncertainty,” and “fear.” Yet the traveling preacher and craftsman (Acts 18:1-4) who wrote these verses had little money and no retirement plan (in a human sense, at least). His words about “being happy with what you already have” suggest he had learned that gratitude turns our attention to what we have instead of what we don’t have.

Application: How rich (or poor) are you, by the measure these verses suggest? If your sense of contentment is strong, how did it get that way? If it’s low, ask God to help you raise it. Research suggests strongly that using your gratitude journal is one good way to do that. In a culture flooded with messages meant to make you want “more,” how can you avoid both pride and shame related to your material “success”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I admit that too often, I don’t want to be happy with food and clothing. Help me blunt the constant thirst for “more,” and learn the peace and gratitude that you offer me. Amen.

Saturday, November 7

Scripture: Psalm 92:1-5

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, Most High; to proclaim your loyal love in the morning, your faithfulness at nighttime with the ten-stringed harp, with the melody of the lyre because you’ve made me happy, LORD, by your acts. I sing with joy because of your handiwork. How awesome are your works, LORD! Your thoughts are so deep!

Observation: Hopefully, you have downloaded your copy of the Gratitude Journal. Take a few minutes each day to jot down things that make you thankful, from the generosity of friends to the food on your table or the right to vote. List-keepers sleep better, exercise more and gain a general contentment that may counteract stress and contribute to overall health. The ultimate source of joy in Psalm 92 was God’s loyal love and faithfulness, realities that are always with us if we just recognize them.

Application: In verse 2, the psalmist spoke of expressing gratitude to God in the morning and at nighttime. In what ways have you, or will you, build recognizing and expressing gratitude into your habit patterns, so that you don’t always have to try to remember to do it? Spend some time today praying about choices you can make to incorporate gratitude more fully into your daily practices as a Christ follower.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you made me for praise and gratitude. When I’m tempted to look for the negative, remind me of your ever-present love and faithfulness—and help me to be grateful for them. Amen.